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The First Snowfall

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Except for the husky breathing of the dogs, the morning is silent now. The sun spies on Samson from the edge of the earth. The sky pales above his head, is a dozen colors on the horizon. He stares at the dogs' big watery eyes. He can't believe these humble, decrepit, gentle things are connected with Jake the Snake. Samson stares at the fancy dog houses. Jake truly loves these animals. And they probably love him.

Samson hears the squeak of a screen door and turns toward the next-door neighbor's house. A wiry man in boxer shorts and cowboy boots stands on the stoop of his back door, squinting at Samson. "Hey. Hey, you. What you doin'?"

Samson drops the jack handle and bolts. His chest aches. His head fills with a roar. Another train. But when he looks back he doesn't see one.

To his horror, the Cadillac has stalled out. He turns the key, pumps the gas pedal. He looks over his shoulder and sees the wiry man coming after him with the jack handle. The engine turns over but doesn't catch; it grinds and grinds.

"Hey, you. Hey, stop, you."

The engine finally catches, and the Cadillac's tires dig into the dirt; the car shimmies, then shoots forward.

Samson's chest hurts like hell. His stomach churns. His foot hurts. His hand hurts. His nose hurts. His ear hurts. Oh, he deserves to hurt. He is a son of a bitch. God is punishing him for being evil.

Samson has sense enough to watch his speed. He wonders whether the police will check the jack handle for fingerprints. He doesn't know why he dropped it.

The wiry man probably read his license plate. Lord.

But a few miles down the road, with no sirens approaching, he tells himself he did nothing. Only if someone could read his mind would anyone know that he was guilty of attempted premeditated dog murder.

Jake loves those dogs. The jerk loves them. Samson shakes his head, thinks of Candy.

He sees a hitch hiker, a bum, up ahead, beckoning. And Samson slows down, puts his turn signal on. The guy's grinning a crazy toothy grin, limbering up his mouth to do some serious yakking, but Samson has already made up his mind that this time *he's* doing the talking.■

The First Snowfall

BY C. MICHAEL MCKINNEY

The young boy plowed through knee-deep snow stretching his legs full-length to reach his father's last footstep. The large hunting boots left chasms into which he could step securely, keep his head bowed, and avoid the cutting wind that burned his cheeks and the tip of his nose.

Matt Jensen paid strict attention to the snow holes left by his father, calculating when and where to move behind him to stay warm. Seven hunting seasons earlier, when he was five, he could lag four steps before the wind would swirl the snow around his father's large frame and cover up his trail. But Matt was taller now. His longer stride made it easier to stay closer to his windbreak.

"How are you doing back there?" his father's voice broke the gray silence.

"I'm okay. Wish the sun was out, though. My face is cold," Matt said.

The cold wind stung his eyes, and he blinked rapidly trying to clear the protective film of tears that was blurring his vision. A double barrel shotgun rested on his father's right shoulder, pointing skyward over Matt's head. He knew that as long as his father carried the gun this way nothing was happening, but he asked anyway.

"Are the dogs finding anything?"

"Spot's acting a little birdy, but there won't be any birds out in the open in this wind. They'll be down in the bottom, holding cover," his father said. "Is that new gun getting heavy yet?"

"A little," Matt replied.

"Well, make sure the safety's on."

He became aware of the death grip he had on his twelfth birthday present. The muscles in his hands and fingers were cramped closed and resisted

opening, like rusty hinges on an old door. Slowly the tension released through his fingers, wrist, and halfway to his elbow before he got his numb right hand completely open. His fingertips tingled with the warmth of returning circulation. Matt shifted the forestock into the crook of his left arm, opened and closed his left hand several times, then checked the safety. He scorned himself for not being ready to shoot if the dogs found some birds.

Matt's father stopped to relight a stubby cigar butt and turned to look at him through a cloud of gray smoke that curled away with the bitter wind.

"Do you think the dogs are smelling good?" Matt asked.

"They probably stink," his father said with a grin.

Matt laughed at his father's joke, and then scouted down the draw they'd been hunting to locate the dogs. He scanned the creek bottom at the end of the draw watching for movement; it was nearly three quarters of a mile away. But all he saw were the bare willow saplings poking through the white blanket beneath the giant cottonwood trees. The leafless branches blended into the gray sky. He could see patches of red shale beneath the north edge of the deep canyon where the walls were vertical, and the snow could not accumulate.

He knew the next rest stop would be in the canyon, where it was warmer and out of the wind, unless the dogs found something before then. Halfway down the hill he could see a plum thicket that resembled a black stain on white carpet. The thicket was massive, blocking the way to the canyon, and stretching from one side of the draw to the other. Matt shivered at the sight, and turned to stand in the warmth of his father's wake.

"It's colder than a well digger's ass," his father said, and continued down the draw.

Matt winced at his father's cursing and followed, thinking the only time he cussed was when they were away from his mother, around men, and especially around guns and dogs. Matt always knew when his father missed a quail, because the roar of "Aw damn" rang louder in his ears than the blast of the mis-aimed gun. Matt cringed at the memory of his mother washing his mouth out with soap for saying "damn." Saliva flooded the space between his cheek and gums and washed over his tongue. He spit the foul taste into the snow.

Matt wondered why men said and did the things they taught their children not to say and do. He thought about the dead coyotes hanging on fenceposts he'd seen along the highway last summer. Fresh tan ones that still looked alive, then skinny gray ones that looked dead, and more at the crossing that were just skeletons. Even in the pickup, he could hear the flies buzzing around the carcasses, smell the gut wrenching stench of rotten flesh, and see the white maggots squirming in and out of bore holes they'd eaten through the dry leathery skin. His father had given him and his cousin, Freddy, a lesson about useless killing. Freddy had killed a jackrabbit with his pellet gun, and Matt's father had scolded the boys over the incident. Freddy said that there wasn't any difference between him killing a "jack" and Matt's father killing a quail.

"You don't kill nothing you don't eat," Matt's dad had told them. "That's the difference. Cows die so we can eat; jackrabbits die so coyotes can eat."

Matt tugged at the drawstrings of his parka hood and made the face opening smaller. He wondered if anything but flies ate dead coyotes. He wished the clouds hadn't covered the November sun this morning, and spoiled his chance of maybe seeing a coyote running down the crystal white creek bottom. He didn't want to shoot it; he wanted to see it alive while he could feel the warmth of the sun on his face.

Matt hadn't shot anything but clay pigeons and tin cans with his new twenty-gauge. He saw a ring-tailed hawk circling the hilltop to his left and hefted the gun to his shoulder, placing the brass bead sight just in front of the soaring bird. The checkered walnut on the forestock felt firm in his grip. The cold blue steel of the receiver gave him a foreign sense of power. He noticed how easy it was to lead the smooth-sailing hawk; following the dodging and fluttering quail would be more difficult. He shot the hawk three times in his mind and imagined the bird folding up in mid-air before dropping to the soft snow. The hawk disappeared behind the hill, and Matt shifted the heavy gun to his shoulder the way he'd seen his father do.

"Get up here Matt," his father said sternly but quietly. "The dogs are on to something."

Matt had fallen behind while he was daydreaming, and now both dogs were on point just ahead of his father. He took the gun from his

shoulder, grasped it firmly with both hands, and began plowing through the snow as fast as he could. He frantically sucked the cold air through his nose, chilling the back of his throat and burning it deep into his lungs. He could see Spot half crouched, like some sculpture, pointing into the sand plum thicket. He knew Sal would be on the other side, in the same frozen position. His heart was pounding, leaping with anticipation.

When the covey rose, Matt knew he had to single out one bird, lead it with the gun barrel and squeeze the trigger. He didn't want to mess up this first chance, and yet there was so much he had to remember, particularly where the dogs were so they wouldn't get peppered with stray bird shot, and, even more important, where his father was. Hunting accidents were common in these parts.

The muscles in his forearm were shaking so badly he didn't know if he could hold the heavy gun steady in the wind. But his father had said that hunting over dogs on point allowed more time for preparation, unless the ground was dry; the dogs lost the scent, and they busted open the covey, which was why his father always anticipated the first snowfall. Dogs could smell better in the snow.

Matt came up alongside his father, placed his left foot forward for balance, shifted most of his weight to the right, shouldered the gun, thumbed the safety switch to "fire," and waited. He stared at Spot standing chest deep in the snow. The dog's head, body, and tail formed a straight line like the needle of a compass. Nothing moved but Spot's nostrils, which opened wider to confirm the scent that had caught his instinctive attention.

"The quail may be running on us," his father said after a long wait. Matt knew that sometimes quail would run ahead of the dogs without their sensing it, especially in the snow.

"Put your safety on and ease up to that thicket." Matt felt the pain in his arms and shoulders subside as he lowered the gun and looked toward the ominous circle of sand plum bushes. He had been hunting with his father since he was five, and on many occasions had played "bird-dog" by going into a thicket or deep grass cover to kick out the birds when the dogs wouldn't. He began walking, staring blankly into the brush, while trying to catch a glimpse of brownish-gray movement on the white snow, but he couldn't seem to focus on one specific point. Even though the plum bushes were winter bare, the gray tangle was so dense he could see only a few feet in front of him. He pulled the gun tighter to his chest. The cold steel warmed him like armor protecting him from the unknown. At the front edge of the thicket he was parallel with Spot. Together, they inched forward in a low crouch as they had done many times before.

On his right, the tan and white spots of Sal were still frozen in space. He peered deeper into the tangled brush, looking for differences in pattern and texture in the snow. There were shallow crevices in the snow where the wind had cut small drifts around the base of each bush. A small sparrow huddled near a clump of grass feeding on sumac berries blown to the ground by the winter wind.

The stiff branches noisily scraped Matt's nylon parka and grabbed at his thin wool shooting gloves. His eyes glanced rapidly over the area before him. He remembered his father talking about birds being so cold you nearly had to kick them out of their nests to get them to fly. Sal had broken her point and was now gradually creeping next to him, unsure of the scent. A sparrow jumped into flight ahead of him. Matt was sure the quail were gone, which was just as well since he couldn't have seen the covey rise from deep within the thicket, much less shoulder his gun and shoot.

Spot was weaving in and out of the cover ahead, nose to the ground, searching once more for the scent. Sal joined him as Matt continued, a bit disappointed, but feeling almost relieved. Then, near the middle of the tangled bushes, he found a depression in the snow littered with sumac berries. He took off his gloves and bent down to examine the nest area. The quail had been there and gone, leaving small tracks going every direction in the snow to mark their escape. Matt stood up and stuffed his gloves into his coat pocket.

"They've been here," Matt called out to his father, who was still out of sight.

"They've run out on us all right," his father replied. "Come out of there; the dogs'll find them."

Matt leaned toward the sound of his father's voice but it died in the wind behind him. He imagined his father crouched on a small hill, lighting a cigar, and watching the dogs work the creek bottom. But when he looked around to them, all he could see was plum thicket, and all he could hear was the gusting wind.

Quickly, he turned to retrace his route, but his empty footsteps in the snow had disappeared amidst the gnarled gray tangle of bare plum and sumac bushes. He was deep in the middle of the thicket, deeper than he'd ever been. He began to panic, and lost his sense of direction. The wind burned.

He positioned his shotgun vertically in front of him, and moved left, plowing into the snarl. Suddenly the short bushes in his path exploded with the flutter of flying quail, and in one smooth motion, he tucked the butt of the gun in his shoulder, saw his father appear on the slope to his left, heard the dogs running to his right, caught a good lead on two quail flying close together, picked out the first and gently squeezed the trigger. The automatic twenty gauge boomed, ejected the shell, and rechambered a new one while Matt drew a bead on the second blur moving in a gentle arc ahead. He shot off another round and the blast made him numb.

He tried to move, but he was spent. He felt as though he were standing in a vacuum, where sight and sound did not exist. He hadn't seen the first bird fall, but he knew the second one had folded like the hawk he had imagined.

Sal picked up the quail, wings beating the dead air around the dog's mouth and pranced back, head held high and proud, as if she had done all the work. He could see his father taking the bird from the dog, smiling, the way his mother said he did when he saw Matt for the first time.

He lowered the gun slightly, his vision blurred from the excitement and the cold. The smell of gun powder hung in the air, and blood raced through his body, tingling his cold toes. He heard his father coaxing the dogs to work. Matt stared at his shotgun. The heat from the barrel had formed the oil into an odd moire pattern. A dullness had spread over the receiver from the spent powder, and sweat from his left hand had displaced the oil on the forestock, leaving his handprint on the finish. The receiver, hot from the burning powder, warmed his hands as he caressed the cordite from the steel.

D-e-a-d, he thought, dragging each letter apart, stretching the victory across the prairie for every living thing to hear. The tension and the cold he had felt were gone, a peaceful calmness had settled over him. He took two shells from his breast pocket and loaded them gently into the magazine, noting how smoothly they slid forward, how securely each one locked into place. ■

Building the Thanksgiving Plate

BY KEITH LONG

If in the deep, dark future, archeologists dig up the remains of my family photo album, they'll probably remark at the regularity with which we ancient peoples ate so much. I cannot remember a time when more than eight members of the Long family sat down to a meal together that somebody didn't get up and take a photo.

So there we are, strung throughout the album, woofing down mashed potatoes, chasing black-eyed peas around the plate, and smirking over strawberry shortcake.

Archeologists will point to the photo album as solid evidence that 20th-century humans spent 97 percent of their time eating, and the other three percent of their time unwrapping gifts while sitting by some tree they killed.

They will establish a number of theories on the evidence: 1) that ancient peoples had a higher metabolism rate; 2) that ancient peoples didn't have many hobbies; 3) that ancient peoples stayed continuously around a food-laden table for protection against wild, carnivorous beasts, and 4) that ancient peoples competed fiercely for the title of "fattest of the tribe."

Maybe the archeologists will find another family album of those kids in the Mountain Dew commercials, and see that humans had recreational activities other than eating. I know for a fact that some families go skiing, some go golfing, some go hiking, some go spelunking, some go shopping.

But not us. We eat.

If it's a Fourth of July photo, then we're cooking hamburgers and hot dogs on the grill. If it's New Year's Day, we're doing glazed ham and the black-eyed pea thing. If it's Christmas, the photos are of a table stocked with quail, potatoes, biscuits, and gravy. If it's Ground Hog Day, we probably sent out for pizza.

But the feast of feasts in the Long archives is Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving lasts four days, and, besides the objective of giving thanks, eating is number one on the agenda.